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Docket No. OPP-00550: Draft Preliminary Food Safety Strategic Plan

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United Poultry Concerns, a national nonprofit organization addressing the treatment of domestic fowl in food production, science, education and entertainment, appreciates the opportunity to present the following comments regarding the President's Council on Food Safety Strategic Plan, on behalf of our ten thousand members.

The Food Safety Initiative has been underway since January 1997, a full three years. The Preliminary Food Safety Plan is the latest manifestation of the Initiative. The Plan is a series of vague generalizations containing little, if any, specific details on how to actually improve the safety of the nation's food supply. This lack of progress on such a critical issue, to which so much time, involvement and resources have been expended, is appalling and suggests a lack of genuine concern about the issue on the part of the Administration. In addition to being a grave disservice to the public, it is also a great disservice to many of the stakeholders who have made a substantial effort to follow the procedure and contribute to the process only to have their valid and valuable input ignored.

Prevention

Since the start of the Initiative, the need for a prevention-based food safety system has repeatedly been expounded, both at public meetings and in written comments. The Plan's Vision Statement proclaims: "We protect public health through a seamless food safety system that uses farm-to-table preventive strategies," and prevention is said to be a guiding theme in developing the Plan. As stated: "A fourth theme shaping the direction of this Strategic Plan is prevention. The old maxim, 'an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure,' holds especially true in the arena of food safety....Decades of experience have taught us that it is more effective, and less expensive, to prevent food safety problems than to respond to outbreaks after they have occurred. By swiftly applying our science-based

understanding of the causes of foodborne hazards, government can direct the adoption of practices that will prevent harm, rather than responding only after people become ill as a result of something they ate." However, there is little incorporation of this theme in the Plan. Since the inception of the Food Safety Initiative, prevention has been given an increasingly diminishing role. Any meaningful plan to promote food safety needs to be prevention based, which entails instituting safeguards at the production level. The repeated urging, by numerous and varied participants, that this crucial point be meaningfully addressed in the Plan continues to be ignored. This gives the distinct impression that the Council is unwilling to bridge this fatal gap in the food safety system.

Faulty Animal Production Practices

The Plan notes, in particular, that animal products pose a high risk to public health. The source of contamination of these products is usually at the point of production, and the only way to actually prevent it is at this point. For example, *Salmonella enteritidis* is transmitted directly from hens to their eggs. Attempting to deal with this pathogen after this point constitutes intervention rather than prevention, which is inevitably far more difficult and less effective. Common production practices, such as the forced molting of hens, are known to greatly increase animals' susceptibility to, and transmission of, *Salmonella enteritidis* and other disease agents. Problematic animal production practices must be effectively addressed if food safety is to be significantly improved. Given the effect these practices have on the high risk foods that are obtained from them, and also on the many other foods that can be contaminated by the manure resulting from animal production, addressing these practices should be top priority. (The regulation of manure management is another necessary component which the Plan currently lacks.)

Existing Knowledge

The section of the Plan entitled "Science and Risk Assessment" claims: "...the limited existing body of knowledge about microbial contamination limits the ability to develop on-farm preventive controls and systems of testing...." However, a vast amount of knowledge already exists which can be implemented at the production level to improve food safety. Examples include such basic changes as: decreasing the density at which animals are housed and improving sanitation so they can avoid being contaminated by their own and each others' feces; eliminating the use of litter, feces and other unwholesome substances in animal diets; curtailing unnecessarily stressful practices and procedures which predispose animals to disease; and improving transportation, handling and slaughter practices. What is being done with this information, and why is the Plan devoid of its mention? What is needed is an objective analysis of this vast wealth of knowledge, and the political will to institute preventive controls at the production level.

Need for Mandatory Production Safeguards

The Plan is presented with the underlying assumption that every sector involved is genuinely concerned with improving food safety. Past experience and present reality show this is not true. For example, production practices which are commonly known to be hazardous to food safety are widely employed.

The Plan emphasizes the voluntary adoption of better practices by industry. This is inappropriate and irresponsible. The public's health is too important to be left up to industry's discretion. This is especially true given industry's past performance. Presently, there are no federal regulations concerning the treatment or conditions to which farmed animals are subjected. Although this is a well known fact, these factors have a great impact on the safety of the food supply and they need to be acted on accordingly. Mandatory safeguards at the production level need to be instituted. In order for this to occur, there needs to be clear statutory/regulatory authority at this level, the lack of which constitutes a major problem in current food safety management.

Specifics:

Under the "Science and Risk Assessment Goal" section, Objective 4 should be reworded to state: "Identify existing, emerging and potential high-risk food safety threats," since many threats that already exist have yet to be classified as such. An example is the deleterious effect on the immune system of hens subjected to unnatural lighting patterns.

Under the "Risk Management Goal" section, Objective 1 seeks to identify areas where risk management gaps exist in the current food safety system. The lack of statutory/regulatory authority to impose mandatory safeguards at the production level constitutes the worst gap in the current food safety system. Also, the final Action Item of this Objective: "Near-term work includes a gap analysis and identification of criteria to improve effectiveness of programs at all levels," should be expanded to identify programs which are lacking but needed.

Objective 2 should be reworded as: "Promote development and implementation of preventive practices, techniques and controls using risk-based approaches and establishment of national standards, including mandatory and performance standards, where appropriate." This will serve to include production practices and to require that standards be mandatory where appropriate. An additional point regarding this objective is that industry has a responsibility to facilitate the adoption of preventive controls, whereas government's role is to ensure that industry meets this responsibility.

Objective 3 should be expanded to specifically include traceback ability and authority. Top priority should be given to improving traceback ability to the point of production. Traceback would provide the greatest incentive for industry to produce safe products. Without this it will be impossible to verify that "The United States system for managing food safety is effective from farm to table," which is one of the three broad goals of the Strategic Plan.

Objective 4 neglects to specify what is actually to be inspected.

Objective 5 should have the word "established" deleted from it to accommodate new regulatory requirements. The Plan does not contain a clear provision for updating or instituting new regulations, which is a crucial necessity that needs to be included somewhere in it.

The draft Plan states that evaluations are being made of the current

statutes and regulations impacting food safety as part of the Strategic Planning process. Statutes and regulations which do not exist but could favorably impact food safety should also be considered in this process. For example, regulatory authority at the production level, with inspection and enforcement provisions, are urgently needed.

Objective 6 should be expanded, or a separate objective added, to provide for the implementation of mandatory approaches where needed, such as at the production level, particularly since voluntary approaches have proven to be unreliable.

Objective 7 should be expanded, or a separate objective added, to provide for the identification of technologies and practices that contribute to food hazards. The Plan's promotion of new technologies is at best premature since, at the same time, it largely ignores the problematic technologies and faulty practices which are the source of many if not the vast majority of food safety problems. Similarly, the use of animal drugs that may be contributing to food safety risks needs to be examined.

Undue Influence of Vested Interests

The excessive influence of vested interests is evident in the Plan with the inclusion of such statements as: "Promote targeted labeling strategies to provide consumers the information necessary for them [to] feel confident in their selection of foods processed by enhanced safety techniques, such as irradiation" (third action item of objective 2 under Risk Management Goals). Clearly, the interests of industry rather than the public are being championed by the inclusion of this statement. First, it is inappropriate to classify irradiation as an "enhanced safety technique," since there have been no studies to determine the long-term human health effects of food irradiation, and valid concerns about the potential risks of this technology remain unresolved. Furthermore, consumers should be provided with information that will enable them to make informed choices rather than cause them to "feel confident" in their selection of foods processed with novel technologies since the latter may cause a false and potentially dangerous sense of security. This action item needs to be revised accordingly or omitted.

Irradiation is an excellent example of an intervention effort to manage pathogens that originate at the production level. Preventive strategies at the production level would essentially preclude the "need" for irradiation.

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the Food Safety Strategic Plan. Please contact us for clarification or additional information. We look forward to your incorporation of our comments in the Plan.